What It Was, Was Jesus

by
C. Daniel Crews

For the 250th Anniversary Service
of the Southern Province
of the Moravian Church,
Wait Chapel, Wake Forest University,
Sunday, November 16, 2003

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2013

http://archive.org/details/whatitwaswasjesu00crew

What It Was, Was Jesus

by
C. Daniel Crews

For the 250th Anniversary Service
of the Southern Province
of the Moravian Church,
Wait Chapel, Wake Forest University,
Sunday, November 16, 2003

Introduction

At the concluding service of the Southern Province's 250th anniversary celebrations, Br. C. Daniel Crews, our Archivist, shared with us the motivation, indeed the inspiration that led the first colony of Brethren to settle in the North Carolina wilderness 250 years ago. That inspiration is still with us as we work for peace and justice in God's world today. We hope and pray that by sharing Br. Crews's address with you here, that this inspiration will lead us as a Church, a Province, and a people of God for many years into the future, till at length we are at rest with the Lord.

Cp284.6
C92w

What It Was, Was Jesus

by
C. Daniel Crews

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. ***For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.*** *And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.* 1 Cor. 2:1-5 (NRSV).

Well, here we are. And who would have thought it? In saying that, I am not referring to the approximately 10 years of planning and preparation which have gone into this service, all the committees and numerous individuals who have given of their time and talent to make this event possible. Nor am I referring only to

NCC
VcU

all the other events, celebrations, and concerts which have filled the last year. Often over these past years this date seemed so far away that it hardly seemed real that someday we would actually be gathered here with this service going on.

No, the "Who would have thought it?" goes much further back than the beginning of our planning a decade ago. Indeed, it goes back to the very beginning of our Province's story. Who would have thought when those first few Single Brethren crossed the boundary line of our recently acquired Moravian Church property in North Carolina about noon exactly 250 years ago tomorrow — who would have thought as they gathered that first night in an abandoned hunter's cabin to sing "We hold arrival lovefeast here in Carolina land" with the wolves howling in the wilderness all around — who would have thought what that little band would become today? Could they have even imagined a Province of thousands of members scattered through five states?

Or consider those men and women and children who soon followed to build on what Bethabara had started, to hew Bethania and Salem and Friedberg and Friedland and Hope out of the wilderness. Not only did they literally have to carve out houses and towns and a livelihood for themselves, but they had to do it in the midst of the American Revolution with threats of violence and confiscation from all sides. And then they had to figure how to adapt

to life in a new nation which did not even exist when the first settlers came, and to get used to a whole different world view from what they had known. What was this American freedom everyone was talking about, and why did it not apply to women and African Americans? Talk about having to deal with a society that is changing!

Then there was the tragedy of the War between the States and the grim years of Reconstruction when there truly was *no* money and the Province was a single signature away from voting itself out of existence. Financial crisis has been rather the norm than the exception in our Province's history.

And every succeeding generation has had its own challenges, and doubts, and fears, and opportunities, some taken and some lost.

What was it that brought the early Moravians to this place, and what caused them (including those who had no choice in where they were to live) to stay with the Church and labor on. What kept those first and later generations of Moravians going?

Well (with a nod to a line from a well known North Carolina entertainer): "What it was, was Jesus!"

These were people who gave living testimony to the words of St. Paul: "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified."

They came and they labored not just for their own comfort and success or to fulfill their

own purposes. Rather, as the hymn puts it, they came "not to glory, but to serve." They knew in the most basic way Christ as their Lord, and they enjoyed a close walk with their Savior. Christ as Chief Elder was not an abstract concept, but the loving Shepherd who knew each of his flock by name, each one's hopes and desires, strengths and foibles, and whose guidance they sought to follow with every step. True, as the hymn says, "at times our steps have not been sure." No, our spiritual ancestors here in the Southern Province were not perfect — far from it. They had their share of petty jealousies and bickerings, and we can now see that some of the views held by many of them, on the role of women for example, and most especially their acceptance of slavery, were wrong pure and simple.

And yet, and yet, as one reads in their diaries and memoirs we find also clearly expressed the living presence of Christ. As Christ said he had to be about his Father's business [Luke 2:49], so we set about doing our Lord's. And all of life was to be filled with this presence and Lordship of Jesus Christ. Not only that, but even as they acknowledged their sins and shortcomings, theirs was a joyful faith, thankful for what the Savior had done for them, and eager to share that message of God's redeeming and abiding love with all. It was the joy of Christ that they sought to share, not in an argumentative way, not even to try to make everybody into Moravians. As we noted in our

publication *Villages of the Lord*:[1]

> To say that Moravian faith is Scripture-based is true. To say we are a liturgical church is true. To say we are Christ-centered is most true. Of the innumerable examples, perhaps this will suffice:
>
> A stranger woman came to Bethabara in 1754, less than a year after the first Brethren arrived to begin settlement of Wachovia. She came to see Br. Kalberlahn, the doctor, but she probably knew she was dying. The Brethren tended her as best they could, and also gave her a book of sermons in English for her husband to read to her. And this he did as she lay on her deathbed. At one point, though, she pined, "I wish I could read German," the language the Brethren were using. When asked why, she said it was on account of her soul. The Brethren replied that she did not have to know German for that. The "way to blessedness is short and simple: The Savior certainly died on the cross for her, and if she believes that, that is all."

This same focus on Christ is expressed and elaborated in respect to the whole Moravian Church in a sermon entitled "Christ Is All" by Bishop J. Kenneth Pfohl, preached in Home Church for the August Thirteenth Festival in 1917:

> To the Moravian Church "*Christ is all.*"
>
> We speak of our Church as "a Christ-centered church," a church that centers *all* on Him. And we mean it very literally. We

---

[1] *My Name Shall Be There*, facing page 1.

mean it with a positiveness difficult to sufficiently make clear. We mean it so certainly that we make Christ and Christ alone our creed. We are not a creedless church, but we are a church of a single creed — "Christ and Him crucified remain our confession of faith." We seek to make Him our all and in all, the one great essential, the one thing needful. Synod after synod, speaking for the Church, has declared it: "*Christ is all.*"

. . .Had you asked Hus why he suffered martyrdom at the stake, his answer would have been "Christ." Had you stood on the great scaffold in the public square of the city of Prague and asked the venerable Budowa why he yielded his life to the cause of the Church, he would have answered "Christ." Yes to them "Christ was all in all," and to live for Him, to do for Him, to die for Him was the supreme thing. . . .

In the Renewed Church it was the same. It was not merely a cool, deliberate purpose or strong determination to obey the Master's command that sent men and women into every part of the world. . . . It was a burning passion of love for Jesus that lit the first missionary lights on tropic island, distant continent, and arctic waste. Something of the very passion of Christ for a lost world impelled them. When Dober declared that he was ready to become a slave himself that he might preach to the slaves on St. Thomas, he was expressing the motive of sacrifice that filled them all as they went forth to bear witness to the crucified Saviour. The passion that impelled them still sounds in their battle cry: "To win for the Lamb that was

slain the reward of His sufferings."

. . .So it has been with the Church in much of its vast mission enterprise. Calls have come in most unexpected manner, through individuals, through governments, through other denominations to undertake new work among neglected and needy peoples. A small Church already carrying a heavy burden of mission responsibility, she might have answered, "We have all we can do," but not so, for when the Lord made it clear that He purposed it, there was but one course to be pursued. He was Lord and Master as well as Saviour, and the Church answered with Isaiah of old: "Here am I, send me."

Thank you, Bishop Pfohl. This was a joy in the Lord that knew there might be a price to pay, discomfort and inconvenience to be endured, yet the love of God poured out upon us in Jesus Christ could not be hoarded as if it were our possession alone. God's grace in Christ is for all, and the Church has the wonderful obligation to proclaim it far and near. And they were not alone in this, for Christ himself through his Holy Spirit goes before. Undaunted in the face of every challenge, our Bishop Edward Rondthaler used to say: "Let us do it together." But that was not just a two way street. It had a threefold dimension. Always understood was, "Let us (you and me) do it together *with Christ.*"

This same Spirit is evident in later generations too. Through wars and depressions,

through growth in the 1950's and branching out into Florida, through changes in society and a recasting of the Florida work among Brothers and Sisters from Central America, Suriname, Guyana, and the Caribbean in ways those first pioneers — of the 1700's or the 1900's — never imagined, the presence of Christ has been manifest to guide and bless.

"Not for ourselves, but for Christ" has been our watchword, the theological underpinning of what our Province has always been about. And speaking of theology, we often say that we most characteristically express our theology in our hymns more than in scholarly tomes. That being so, our Province through the years has known well, in the words of the Lutheran hymn, "Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing." Yet thank God we are not left only to our own strength, but Christ writes his words on human hearts: "The word of God, which n'er shall cease, proclaims free pardon, grace, and peace; salvation shows in Christ alone, the perfect will of God makes known." If you want a convenient summary of what the Gospel is, just read the five stanzas of that hymn. This is the firm foundation upon which our Province has been built, and members of all the generations have joined in singing this truth: "The Savior's blood and righteousness my beauty is, my glorious dress; thus well-arrayed I need not fear when in his presence I appear."

And so here we are for this marvelous

celebration. Sure, many challenges lie upon us — when have they not? There are hard questions we have to deal with, and yet as we look around the various congregations and agencies of the Province, there is so much good going on, so much sharing of the love of Christ, that we may take heart and thank our dear Lord for what he is doing among and through us.

We have been here 250 years and we rejoice. Now it is time to get on with the tasks that lie ahead. Will our Province be here to celebrate its 300th or its 500th anniversary? In truth, I do not know. Remember, Zinzendorf wrote a hymn saying that Herrnhut should exist only as long as the Lord had work for them to do and they were willing to do it. So too for us, if the Lord will, and if he still has work for us to do — and looking at the world today, there appears to be more than enough for us to do — then I believe we have ample reason to go forward "with courage for the future." At the beginning of the 20th century Bishop Edward Rondthaler in his Memorabilia for 1900 made an uncannily accurate prediction of what the 20th century would bring. I would not presume to attempt such a thing for the 21st century. I simply don't know. But "I know whom I have believed, and am convinced[2] that He is able" [2 Tim. 1:12 KJV]. And that's all I need to know. Whatever new temptations, new possi-

[2] Persuaded.

bilities, new advances lie before us, Jesus Christ remains the same yesterday, and tomorrow, and forever [Heb. 13:8], and if we follow him, we will do well.

When I was deciding on the title for this sermon, our Assistant Archivist Richard Starbuck said, "No, Daniel. Not 'What it was, was Jesus.' Rather, what it was, *is* Jesus!" For various reasons of allusion and euphony I did not change the title, but Richard as usual had put his finger on the main point. There is no question that what began and preserved this Province for 250 years *was* Jesus. The question to us is, "Is it still Jesus?" Is it Jesus whom we gratefully accept as our Savior; is it Jesus who is our Chief Elder actively guiding us; is it Jesus who is the beginning, middle, and end of all we proclaim? Our Lord is ready, willing, and able, and to us the call comes as it comes to every generation: "Choose this day whom you will serve!" [Josh. 24:15]. And like all those generations before, by God's grace may we respond: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord!" [Josh. 24:15]. And who is this Lord? Ultimately the question is not "what," but "who." And who it was, who it has always been, who it will always be, is Jesus!

Two hundred fifty years ago
you brought us to this place
and still we seek to learn and grow
to manifest your grace.
With wider vision may we give
ourselves to others while we live;
O may we all with one accord
still follow you, dear Lord.

Dear Christ, in faith we heard your call
in this and ev'ry land
the Gospel to proclaim to all,
upheld by your strong hand.
At times our steps have not been sure,
but by your grace we shall endure
to sing our God's redeeming will,
and faith with deeds fulfill.

O Lord, in love you came to earth
to rise, but first to die;
yet in your death we find our birth,
all lives to sanctify.
When all your saving works we view
our hearts are filled with love for you,
and love for one another grows
as your love overflows.

And so, good Savior, now we pray:
grant us your Spirit's pow'r
as in the past, so in our day
and ev'ry future hour:
with hope may our lives testify
that you all needful gifts supply
to serve the world and unify
your church for life on high.

Moravian Archives
457 S. Church Street
Winston-Salem, North Carolina